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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: TWO DEAD AS OPPOSITION TRANSPORTATION BLOCKADE
TURNS VIOLENT

Classified By: Acting P/E Counselor David Renz; reason 1.4(d)

1. (U) SUMMARY. On July 2 the Awami League (AL)-led transportation blockade of the country turned violent. Both an opposition activist and a policeman died during the protests, while over 100 people were injured. The AL and its opposition coalition partners announced a dawn-to-dusk hartal for July 4 to protest the death of the activist, blaming police for his death. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The AL-led 14-Party Alliance enforced a total blockade of the country's highways, railways, and waterways on July 2 from 9 AM to 3 PM to press their demands for electoral and caretaker government reforms. In Dhaka, protests were organized at 18 key locations within and surrounding the city to enforce the blockade. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police deployed around 10,000 officers in the city to handle potential problems.

3. (U) Clashes between police and demonstrators broke out in various parts of Dhaka and in several other locations throughout the country during the six-hour blockade. Demonstrators damaged or destroyed dozens of vehicles that were violating the blockade. In addition, protestors blocked several trains that were servicing Dhaka and other cities.

4. (U) About mid-morning, a 45-year old AL activist collapsed and later died. Allegations quickly spread that he died after police used batons and tear gas to disperse a crowd of protestors in the Mohakhali area of Dhaka. A journalist told us that the activist was killed after "a tear gas shell exploded on his head." Police, however, told us that the man had died of cardiac arrest. One embassy source generally critical of the BNP later corroborated the police version, based on secondary reports. The body was brought to the Dhaka Medical College morgue for an autopsy, and later returned to his family for burial on July 3.

5. (U) A police sub-inspector was killed in a separate incident in Narayanganj south of Dhaka. The officer was reportedly struck in the head by a rock thrown by protestors who were blocking the main Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Police and demonstrators had been fighting all morning for control of that stretch of highway, and protestors had attacked and torched several vehicles that were attempting to use the road.

6. (U) Later that evening the opposition coalition announced a dawn-to-dusk hartal for July 4 to protest the killing of the AL protestor at Mohakhali. AL leader Sheikh Hasina condemned the killing of the protestor during a press conference. She also claimed that BNP-hired thugs, rather than AL protestors, had killed the police officer. In light of yesterday's violence, police are predicting similar

violence for tomorrow's hartal.

17. (C) Kazi Zafarullah, one of Sheikh Hasina's closest advisors and a member of the AL Presidium, complained to us about the "brutality" of the police during the protest, claiming that he himself had been hit by police at one point. He said that he could not understand the violent response of the police that led to the death of the protestor. When reminded that a police officer also died he told us that "when the police kill our people, (our people) can't be held responsible for their reactions."

18. (C) COMMENT. This violence is only the beginning of what is likely to become a very rough pre-election campaign. The AL believes that, like in 1996, it needs to demonstrate control of the streets in order to win the elections. However, the AL needs to be careful not to overplay its hand. At least in the cities, where protest actions are most disruptive, the public is growing increasingly frustrated with the confrontational tactics of both parties. The BNP, while it cannot risk ceding control of the streets to the AL, also cannot appear to be using excessive force to foil the protests. Both sides have an incentive to provoke the other side to violence, and both want to appear the victim of the other's excesses. Sadly, both parties view the loss of life simply as the cost of playing the political game in Bangladesh. END COMMENT.
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